

MISCELLANEOUS.

SOME ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

BY NICHOLAS ROWE (1709).

"It seems to be a kind of respect due to the memory of excellent men, especially those whom their wit and learning have made famous, to deliver some account of themselves, as well as their works, to posterity. For this reason, how fond do we see some people of discovering any little personal story of the great men of antiquity! their families, the common accidents of their lives, and even their shape, make, and features have been the subject of critical inquiries. How trifling soever this curiosity may seem to be, it is certainly very natural; and we are hardly satisfied with an account of any remarkable person, till we have heard him described even to the very clothes he wears. As for what relates to men of letters, the knowledge of an author may sometimes conduce to the better understanding of his book; and though the works of Shakespeare may seem to many not to want a comment, yet I fancy some little account of the man himself may not be thought improper to go along with them.

"He was the son of Mr. John Shakespeare, and was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, in Warwickshire, in April, 1564. His family, as appears by the register and public writings relating to that town, were of good figure and fashion there, and are mentioned as gentlemen. His father, who was a considerable dealer in wool, had so large a family, ten children in all,¹ that, though he was his eldest son, he could give him no better education than his own employment. He had bred him, it is true, for some time at a free-school, where it is probable he acquired what Latin he was master of; but the narrowness of his circumstances, and the want of his assistance at home forced his father to withdraw him from thence, and unhappily prevented his further proficiency in that language. It is without controversy, that in his works we scarce find any traces of anything that looks like an imitation of the ancients. The delicacy of his taste, and the natural bent of his own great genius (equal, if not superior, to some of the best of theirs) would certainly have led him to read and study them with so much pleasure, that some of their fine images would naturally have insinuated themselves into and been mixed with his own writings; so that his not copying at least something from them may be an argument of his never having read them.² Whether his ignorance of the ancients were

¹ Here Mr. Rowe must be mistaken. Mr. John Shakespeare, the husband of Mary Arden, who is known as a glover, had not ten children but only eight. It is commonly believed that Mr. Rowe counted in some of the children of John Shakespeare the shoemaker, as children of John Shakespeare the gentleman.

² Mr. Rowe is mistaken when he speaks of Shakespeare's "ignorance of the ancients" and claims that in the poet's works "we scarcely find any traces of anything that looks like an imita-

a disadvantage to him or no, may admit of a dispute; for, though the knowledge of them might have made him more correct, yet it is not improbable but that the regularity and deference for them, which would have attended that correctness, might have restrained some of that fire, impetuosity, and even beautiful extravagance which we admire in Shakespeare; and I believe we are better pleased with those thoughts, altogether new and uncommon, which his own imagination supplied him so abundantly with, than if he had given us the most beautiful passages out of the Greek and Latin poets, and that in the most agreeable manner that it was possible for a master of the English language to deliver them.

"Upon his leaving school, he seems to have given entirely into that way of living which his father proposed to him; and, in order to settle in the world after a family manner, he thought fit to marry while he was yet very young. His wife was the daughter of one Hathaway, said to have been a substantial yeoman in the neighborhood of Stratford. In this kind of settlement he continued for some time, till an extravagance that he was guilty of forced him both out of his country and that way of living which he had taken up; and, though it seemed at first to be a blemish upon his good manners, and a misfortune to him, yet it afterwards happily proved the occasion of exerting one of the greatest geniuses that ever was known in dramatic poetry. He had, by a misfortune common enough to young fellows, fallen into ill company; and among them some, that made a frequent practice of deer-stealing, engaged him with them more than once in robbing a park that belonged to Sir Thomas Lucy, of Charlecote, near Stratford. For this he was prosecuted by that gentleman, as he thought, somewhat too severely; and, in order to revenge that ill usage, he made a ballad upon him. And though this, probably the first essay of his poetry, be lost, yet it is said to have been so very bitter, that it redoubled the prosecution against him to that degree, that he was obliged to leave his business and family in Warwickshire for some time, and shelter himself in London.

"It is at this time, and upon this accident, that he is said to have made his first acquaintance in the play-house. He was received into the company then in being, at first in a very mean rank; but his admirable wit, and the natural turn of it to the stage, soon distinguished him, if not as an extraordinary actor, yet as an excellent writer. His name is printed, as the custom was in those times, among those of the other players, before some old plays, but without any particular account of what sort of parts he used to play; and, though I have inquired, I could never meet with any further account of him this way, than that the top of his performance was the Ghost in his own Hamlet. I should have been much more pleased to have learned from some certain authority which was the first play he wrote: it would be without doubt a pleasure to any man curious in things of this kind, to see and know what was the first essay of a fancy like Shakespeare's. Perhaps we are not to look for his beginnings, like those of other authors, among his least perfect writings: art had so little, and nature so large a share in what he did, that, for aught I know, the performances of his youth, as they were the most vigorous, and had the most fire and strength of imagination in them, were the best. I would not be thought by this to mean, that his fancy was so loose and extravagant as to be independent on the rule and government of judgment; but that what he thought

tion of the ancients." The poet must have been able to read Latin (and also some modern languages) with fluency. Consider that at his time there existed as yet no translations of the works of Livy, Plautus, Ovid, Terence, and others of the ancients, and yet how conversant must the poet have been with all of them. The drama "Julius Cæsar" alone proves an unusual familiarity with Roman history and Latin authors.

was commonly so great, so justly and rightly conceived in itself, that it wanted little or no correction, and was immediately approved by an impartial judgment at the first sight. But, though the order of time in which the several pieces were written be generally uncertain, yet there are passages in some few of them which seem to fix their dates. So the Chorus at the end of the fourth Act of Henry V., by a compliment very handsomely turned to the Earl of Essex, shows the play to have been written when that lord was general for the Queen of Ireland. And his eulogy upon Queen Elizabeth and her successor King James, in the latter end of Henry VIII., is a proof of that play's being written after the accession of the latter of those two princes to the crown of England.

"Whatever the particular times of his writing were, the people of his age, who began to grow wonderfully fond of diversions of this kind, could not but be highly pleased to see a genius arise among them of so pleasurable, so rich a vein, and so plentifully capable of furnishing their favorite entertainments. Besides the advantages of his wit, he was in himself a good-natured man, of great sweetness in his manners, and a most agreeable companion; so that it is no wonder if with so many good qualities he made himself acquainted with the best conversations of those times. Queen Elizabeth had several of his plays acted before her, and without doubt gave him many gracious marks of her favor, it is that maiden princess plainly, whom he intends by, "a fair vestal throned by the west." And that whole passage is a compliment very properly brought in, and very handsomely applied to her.¹ She was so well pleased with that admirable character of Falstaff, in the two Parts of Henry IV., that she commanded him to continue it for one play more, and to show him in love. This is said to be the occasion of his writing *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. How well she was obeyed, the play itself is an admirable proof. Upon this occasion it may not be improper to observe, that this part of Falstaff is said to have been written originally under the name of Oldcastle: some of that family being then remaining, the Queen was pleased to command him to alter it; upon which he made use of Falstaff. The present offence was indeed avoided; but I do not know whether the author may not have been somewhat to blame in his second choice, since it is certain that Sir John Falstaff, who was a knight of the garter, and a lieutenant-general, was a name of distinguished merit in the wars in France, in the times of Henry V. and Henry VI.²

"What grace soever the Queen conferred upon him, it was not to her only he owed the fortune which the reputation of his wit made. He had the honor to meet with many and uncommon marks of favor and friendship from the Earl of Southampton, famous in the histories of that time for his friendship to the unfortunate Earl of Essex. It was to that noble Lord that he dedicated his poem of *Venus and*

¹ The passage occurs in "*A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*," Act 2, Scene 1, and reads as follows:

"That very time I saw (but thou could'st not)
Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
Cupid all arm'd: a certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west;
And loos'd his love shaft smartly from his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts:
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon;
And the imperial votaress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free."

² This is a mistake. The name which Mr. Rowe has in mind is Sir John Fastolfe, not Sir John Falstaff.

Adonis. There is one instance so singular in the magnificence of this patron of Shakespeare's, that if I had not been assured that the story was handed down by Sir William Davenant, who was probably very well acquainted with his affairs, I should not have ventured to have inserted, that my Lord Southampton at one time gave him a thousand pounds, to enable him to go through with a purchase which he had heard he had a mind to. A bounty very great, and very rare at any time, and almost equal to that profuse generosity the present age has shown to French dancers and Italian singers.

"What particular habitude or friendships he contracted with private men, I have not been able to learn, more than that every one who had any true taste of merit, and could distinguish men, had generally a just value and esteem for him. His exceeding candour and good nature must certainly have inclined all the gentler part of the world to love him, as the power of his wit obliged the men of the most delicate knowledge and polite learning to admire him.

"His acquaintance with Ben Jonson began with a remarkable piece of humanity and good-nature. Mr. Jonson, who was at that time altogether unknown to the world, had offered one of his plays to the players, in order to have it acted; and the persons into whose hands it was put, after having turned it carelessly and superciliously over, were just upon returning it to him with an ill-natured answer, that it would be of no service to their company; when Shakespeare luckily cast his eye upon it, and found something so well in it as to engage him first to read it through, and afterwards to recommend Mr. Jonson and his writings to the public. Jonson was certainly a very good scholar, and in that had the advantage of Shakespeare; though at the same time I believe it must be allowed, that what nature gave the latter was more than a balance for what books had given the former; and the judgment of a great man upon this occasion was, I think, very just and proper. In a conversation between Sir John Suckling, Sir William Davenant, Endymion Porter, Mr. Hales of Eton, and Ben Jonson,—Sir John Suckling, who was a professed admirer of Shakespeare, had undertaken his defence against Ben Jonson with some warmth: Mr. Hales, who had sat still for some time, told them that, if Shakespeare had not read the ancients, he had likewise not stolen anything from them; and that, if he would produce any one topic finely treated by any of them, he would undertake to show something upon the same subject at least as well written by Shakespeare.

"The latter part of his life was spent, as all men of good sense will wish theirs may be, in ease, retirement, and the conversation of his friends. He had the good fortune to gather an estate equal to his occasions, and, in that, to his wish; and is said to have spent some years before his death at his native Stratford. His pleasurable wit and good-nature engaged him in the acquaintance, and entitled him to the friendship of the gentlemen of the neighborhood. Among them, it is a story almost still remembered in that country, that he had a particular intimacy with Mr. Combe, an old gentleman noted thereabouts for his wealth and usury. It happened, that in a pleasant conversation among their common friends, Mr. Combe told Shakespeare, in a laughing manner, that he fancied he intended to write his epitaph, if he happened to outlive him; and, since he could not know what might be said of him when he was dead, he desired it might be done immediately. Upon which Shakespeare gave him these four lines of verse:

"Ten in the hundred lies here ingrav'd;
'Tis a hundred to ten his soul is not sav'd:
If any man ask, who lies in this tomb?
O, ho! quoth the devil, 'tis my John-a-Combe."

But the sharpness of the satire is said to have stung the man so severely, that he never forgave it.

"He died in the fifty-third year of his age, and was buried on the north side of the chancel, in the great church at Stratford, where a monument is placed in the wall. On his gravestone underneath is:

" 'Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear
To dig the dust inclosed here:
B'est be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.'

"He had three daughters, of which two lived to be married; Judith, the elder, to one Mr. Thomas Quiney, by whom she had three sons, who all died without children; and Susannah, who was his favorite, to Dr. John Hall, a physician of good reputation in that country. She left one child only, a daughter, who was married first to Thomas Nash, Esq; and afterwards to Sir John Bernard, of Abington, but died likewise without issue.

DR. KNIGHT'S SATIRE, "THE PRAISE OF HYPOCRISY."

To the Editor of The Open Court:

To my mind there has always been a sort of melancholy irony about the duel between David and Goliath. I mean the termination of the affair. The armory of the giant furnished the sword with which his own head was cut off.

This idea came to me with much force during the reading of the article by Dr. Knight in the September number of *The Open Court*. My thought reverted to the days when I was in the early twenties, when, under the influence of self-derived intelligence, I was an atheist of atheists; and I thought that were I now as I was then, I would ask no more effective cudgel against the Church, Religion, and even Christianity than that same article of Dr. Knight's. The fact that Dr. Knight is honest and sincere in his purpose has nothing to do with the effect of his utterances, unless to render his pessimistic, sophistic casuistry the more subtle and dangerous. As I read, I was conscious of a certain vivification of old buried doubts and questionings, that seemed to shimmer and gibe,—like the wicked nuns evoked by Bertram in "Robert le Diable" to tempt Robert, while the bassoon performs a diabolical incantation. And as I read on, these feelings became more intense, until laying the magazine down on finishing the article, I could but feel that the reverend gentleman had not only put a powerful weapon into the hands of the foes of religion, and one that they will not be slow to use, but done much to shake and unsettle,—if not shatter,—the weak and trembling faith of more than one soul.

With the truth or error of his suggestions this review has nothing to do. The question is whether it is judicious to gather up the unexploded shells of the besieging enemy, light their fuses and roll them into the ranks of the defenders.

"I have many things to say to you, but ye cannot bear them now," and in view of this utterance from The Master, is it not well to remain silent regarding some things?

Dr. Knight makes the trimming religionist say, "In short, it is only that we must exercise common sense and see things as they are. Thus we see, in the story of Jesus, not only the ideal human being,—we also see what becomes of the ideal. For as soon as the Pharisees were persuaded that He would make no compromise, they put Him to death."